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ABSTRACT

The application of emerging digital technologies such as e-mail, the World Wide Web and the Internet in the educational setting has received wide acceptance all over the world. Both corporate and academic agendas have recognized the potential advantages of e-learning; however, as a new field, e-learning courses comes with important issues that have yet to be tackled. Issues either pre-existing in the academic context, or stemming from the intertwinement of new technologies with the delivery and assimilation of education, minimize the effectiveness of e-learning implementations and therefore decrease the value of perception of this practice. Such an issue is academic integrity and ethics. This paper identifies ethical issues that concern the stakeholders involved, and stresses the need for their consideration when implementing an e-learning course. (Contains 21 references.) (Author)

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Abstract: The application of emerging digital technologies such as e-mail, the World Wide Web (WWW) and the Internet in the educational setting has received wide acceptance all over the world. Both corporate and academic agendas have recognized the potential advantages of e-learning; however, as a new field, e-learning comes with important issues that have yet to be tackled. Issues either pre-existing in the academic context, or stemming from the intertwining of new technologies with the delivery and assimilation of education, minimize the effectiveness of e-learning implementations and therefore decrease the value perception of this practice. Such an issue is academic integrity and ethics. This paper attempts to identify ethical issues that concern the stakeholders involved, and stress the need for their consideration when implementing an e-learning course.

Keywords: E-learning, ethics, academic cheating, stakeholder theory

1. Introduction

Educational institutions have always been confronted with behavioural incidents that constitute ethical and moral implications among students, teachers and/or management. In order to deal with these implications, academic institutions proceed in the development of policies, regulations and disciplinary procedures. However, the introduction of Information Technology (IT) practices within the academic context has created a new set of questions considering value standards and ethics.

The cases of e-learning and distant learning are far more challenging, as physical presence and interaction are no longer required among students and educators. As all interactions are virtual, all academic standards, policies and regulations need to be re-examined, in order to constitute an e-learning course 'ethical'. Issues regarding equity, legality, privacy and justice stemming from political, social, cultural and economical implications need to be studied for the design and implementation of web based courses, as they have been in traditional educational practices (Athanasou, 1998).

The inquiry on ethics is the first and foremost task when evaluating an e-learning course (Athanasou, 1998). The consideration of ethical issues within such a course is as important as in any other educational setting. However, although most -if not all- academic institutions have formulated codes of ethics and teach ethics in their curriculum, little work has been done in e-learning so far (Stahl, 2002).

The purpose of our research is to identify ethical issues that need to be considered in the design and implementation of e-learning courses. Considering the socio-technical nature of e-learning, *stakeholder analysis* is employed as a tool to identify stakeholders, their relationships and potential ethical and moral implications within this context. More specifically, we have applied stakeholder analysis in three e-learning cases, and examined stakeholder interests and potential conflicts of interest that could trigger implications of ethical nature. Finally, we have proceeded in making some initial suggestions as to how our research findings can be used in order to formulate mechanisms for avoiding or/and dealing with such occurrences.

2. Education, IT and Ethics

Academic integrity has been under investigation for over a century. Cheating and plagiarism are two of the most popular 'unethical' practices students engage in (Philips and Horton, 2000). However, a mere 1.3% of students has been reported as 'being caught' (Haines *et al.*, 1986 in Philips and Horton, 2000) from the 50% to 75% of students which admit having participated in some sort of academic dishonesty Baird, 1980 in Philips and Horton, 2000).

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However, cheating is not the only ethical issue appearing in academic institutions. Issues such as gender or racial discrimination, as well as complaint procedures, disciplinary procedures, student responsibilities and rights are addressed in codes of ethics of universities. The introduction of IT has brought changes to how these issues become apparent. Also, IT has brought changes to the skills required, the roles of people involved, and the communication and interaction among students and teachers (Stahl, 2002; Watson, 2001; Schell, 2001). Therefore, changes must be brought to codes of ethics or the approach on ethical issues by academic institutions that employ IT in their facilities.

"Ethics is the philosophical study of the moral value of human conduct and the rules that govern it". Furthermore, ethics is mainly associated with specific people or groups of people that have social responsibility (L'Etang, 1992 in Grimshaw, 2001). Therefore, in order to apply ethical thinking in our context, it is important to identify the "groups of people that have social responsibility" in academic settings, and examine their position within the network of relationships and operations (Grimshaw, 2001, p.43).

3. Methodology

Ethics is a sensitive and delicate issue. It is a subject that concerns people's opinions and behaviours which can not be approached easily. Also, ethical issues often arise from hidden or unobvious agendas and are therefore difficult to spot directly. Another point that needs to be considered is that in the specific context of e-learning, ethical issues stem from the interaction of education and computing- hence human agents with computers. The socio-technical nature of e-learning implies that the investigation on ethics requires a wider frame of reference, and a need for employing special tools to our purpose. Stakeholder theory is a prominent approach to the examination of social networks, considered as a capable socio-technical tool.

Stakeholder theory is primarily used to identify stakeholders, their interests, and conflicts of interest, often with a moral perspective (Key, 1999). We therefore decided to apply stakeholder analysis to e-learning cases, aiming to identify stakeholder groups and how they and their interests are related within an e-learning environment.

The three cases used in our analysis, which will be described briefly later on, were documented using several techniques. The main process for getting input in our research was by taking interviews. About 20 interviews were conducted and recorded in order to provide the initial data for analysis. Additionally a number of documents were analysed including technical reports, deliverables, memos, e-mails and discussions. Finally a number of informal discussions contributed to our research.

Interviews are favoured because they allow the researcher the "best access to the interpretations that the participants have regarding the actions and events which have or are taking place, and the views and aspirations of themselves and other participants" (Walsham, 1995). An added benefit is that it allows researchers to step back and examine the interpretations of their fellow participants in some detail.

From the findings of the interviews and discussions, we have identified common issues within the three cases, which we have grouped and presented as being most critical. The reported issues should be considered both in terms of the analysis and design of the information systems, and the day-to-day practice of the learning/ teaching processes.

3.1 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory has been used extensively in the business context since the eighties (Key, 1999; Barrett, 2001; Papazafeiropoulou *et al.*, 2001). Stakeholder Analysis attempts to evaluate the role of actors in a firm's environment, as Freeman (1984) -considered to be the founder of stakeholder theory- suggests in his original work that both internal and external actors influence the organization's behaviour and performance.

There are various definitions of what a 'Stakeholder' is (Barrett, 2001; Papazafeiropoulou *et al.*, 2001). Freeman (1984, p. 46) defined a stakeholder within an organization as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives". Another approach, provided by Clarkson (1995), describes stakeholders as:

"persons or groups that have, or claim, ownership, rights, or interests in a corporation and its activities, past, present, or future. Such claimed rights or interests are the result of transactions with, or actions taken by, the corporation, and may be legal or moral, individual or collective" (p. 106).

The application of stakeholder analysis in an organization attempts to identify stakeholders, their claims, rights and interests, the transactions and relationships among stakeholders, as well as the moral and ethical "guidelines for the operation and management

of corporations" (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). As the authors suggest, stakeholder theory has three main aspects: The descriptive, the instrumental and the normative:

- The *descriptive* aspect of stakeholder theory concerns the identification, description and possibly explanation of characteristics and behaviors of an organization.
- The *instrumental* aspect considers the identification of internal and external organizational connections.
- The *normative* aspect, where the theory attempts to elaborate on the function of the organization, and identify various moral and ethical issues that stem from the interconnections within the organizational network.

Ethical issues, as stated by Key (1999), are not considered in the traditional philosophical sense; rather, their identification aims at measuring the " 'fit' for utilitarianism" (p. 320), or, bringing to light the necessary trade-offs that need to be made between stakeholders' goals and the organization's goals.

Since the eighties, stakeholder analysis has found wide application in various contexts, such as the Information Systems (IS) area, and lately in the e-commerce area (Papazafeiropoulou *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, it seems appropriate that stakeholder analysis can be applied to e-learning cases, and perhaps assist in clarifying what issues need to be addressed in the design and delivery of an e-learning course.

3.2 Description of Cases

The proposition of theoretical directions for the case of e-learning can be justified if empirical evidence can support conceptualisations that are not only descriptive but also incorporate and entail substantial practical implications. To this end, we have applied stakeholder analysis to three e-learning cases.

The case studies in our research are:

- (1). The Global E-management Master (GEM) e-learning system and especially the T1 course entitled E-technology, which was delivered to the student of the GEM consortium. GEM provided expertise from an international e-learning implementation targeting on executives training with specific characteristics.
- (2). The XEXO project (Educational space without limits), which objective was to establish an e-learning system and to deliver a master degree course to the students of three universities in Greece. XEXO was a joint effort of three well-known universities in Greece to design a common curriculum and to establish an infrastructure for e-learning.
- (3). Finally, the Teleducation Center of Athens University of Economics and Business (TC-AUEB) which utilizes the WebCT platform in order to provide learning content to students. The TC of Athens University of Economics and Business, one of the biggest and well-organized universities in Greece with more than 8000 students refers to the implementation of an infrastructure for the delivery of e-courses, and the documentation of relevant services to educators and learners.

4. Applying Stakeholder Analysis to the three Cases

As mentioned before, we decided to perform stakeholder analysis to the three cases, compare our findings, and produce a generalized report on stakeholder groups, their interests and their relationships. This way, we could both gain more insights from multiple cases, and provide a set of issues which are identified in all cases, and are therefore most possible of appearing in other e-learning cases. Following we present a brief overview of the findings of stakeholder analysis in the three case studies.

4.1 Identification Of Stakeholders

Global E-management Master (G.E.M.)

1. The project manager
2. An e-learning specialist (webCT specialist)
3. An HTML programmer and a multimedia specialist that adopt the book oriented learning content to HTML pages with multimedia features.
4. Three content seekers, who based on general guidelines were searching internet, books and other sources in order to select content
5. Teachers in others Universities of the GEM consortium that would use the content in their teaching (in GEM same content is used in different universities)
6. A contact person for the facilitation of communication between development team and teachers in other universities

7. Students

XEXO project

1. The project manager, prof at the Technical university of Crete
2. Two project coordinators in AUEB, and Univ. of Macedonia
3. An e-learning specialist, owner of a company specialized in multimedia solution (Extreme media solutions S.A)
4. A content responsible for each course module, who worked according to the guidelines agreed by the committee constituted by (1, 2, 3)
5. An e-learning specialist for each course (webCT specialist)
6. An HTML programmer for each course module and a multimedia specialist that adopt the book oriented learning content to HTML pages with multimedia features.
7. A secretary who supported the project manager.
8. A help desk person who provided help at the pilot run of the system.
9. Students

Teleducation Center of Athens University of Economics and Business (TC-AUEB)

1. The Project Manager, a professor of the AUEB
2. The projects' scientific coordinator, an e-learning specialist
3. A project manager for each course that was developed (1,2 & 3 constitute a steering committee that is responsible for the specification and agreement on general guidelines).
4. A content responsible for each course, who evaluated the learning content in close cooperation with the teacher / content provider
5. An HTML programmer for each course and a multimedia specialist that adopt the book oriented learning content to HTML pages with multimedia features.
6. Two e-learning platform (WebCT) specialists, employees in the Teleducation Center) who facilitated the whole process of uploading learning content on content server.
7. A secretary who supported the project manager
8. A help desk person who provided help at the pilot run of the system.
9. Students

4.2 Summary of Findings

Following the identification of key stakeholders in the three cases, we have proceeded in clustering them in 5 main categories, according to their generalized roles. In Table 1 we present the clusters of stakeholders that need to be examined. Following Table 1, we have proceeded in discussing their roles and interests.

CASE STUDY/ STAKEHOLDERS	GEM	XEXO	TC-AUEB
MANAGEMENT	Project Manager	Project Manager Project coordinators	Project Manager
CONTENT DEVELOPMENT	Three content seekers	One content developer for each module	Scientific Coordinator One for each course Teachers
TEACHING STAFF	Teachers	Teachers	Teachers
TECHNOLOGY RELATED STUFF	E-learning specialist HTML programmer Multimedia specialist	E-learning specialist HTML programmer Multimedia specialist	E-learning specialist HTML programmer Multimedia specialist
STUDENTS	Students	Students	Students

Table 1: Stakeholder Groups

1. **MANAGEMENT:** Overall, management issues regard adherence to deadlines and milestones, strategy, policy and meeting the implementation objectives.

Project Manager: The Project Manager has an overall responsibility for *managerial issues* and performs all the necessary processes that secure the timely alignment to *timetable*. Deadlines, and project milestones are of critical importance. The ultimate objective of this stakeholder is a well functioning elearning system that has *meet the implementation objectives* through the establishment of flexible control managerial mechanisms.

Institution Policy Maker: In business environment or in academic environment this person has an overall authority to determine or to *influence the strategy* and the consequent *policies*. Concerning *e-learning* this person influences the importance that is paid to *e-learning* implementations since in many cases *e-learning* is recognized as of limited importance and an evangelist is required in order to transform this opinion within organization.

2. **CONTENT DEVELOPMENT:** This stakeholder group is concerned with developing the content to be taught to students.

Content Author: The main concern of this stakeholder group is to provide content that meets the standards that have been specified by the Scientific Coordinator, or have been agreed by a correspondent committee. In many instances the limited experience in *e-learning* is a main obstacle for his performance since the majority of content providers have a book-oriented perspective, which in *e-learning* becomes boring.

Scientific Coordinator: This stakeholder pursues a two-fold goal. Firstly he has to align good *practices of e-learning* in specific implementation and secondly to demand for *high quality learning content*. Of course the alignment of good practices implies a number of issues such as collaboration, motivation, active participation, ethics, etc.

3. **TEACHING STAFF:** This stakeholder group is *managing the learning process* through the capabilities of the *e-learning* platform. He has in mind a learning scenario and a personal way of teaching which in many times tries to simulate in *e-learning* through technological capacities.

4. **TECHNOLOGY RELATER STAFF:** Implementation of the system is the main concern of this stakeholder group.

E-learning platform specialist: This person is the critical *connector that stands between content provider and learner*. The performed utilization of *e-learning* platform's capabilities requires the establishment of a common language between content author and *e-learning* platform specialist. In some cases authors do not know what an *e-learning* platform offers

Technical Manager: A technical manager has an overall responsibility for all the technical aspects of the implementations concerning *e-learning* platforms and other applications necessary for the development of content. He justifies economical proposals of technology providers and according to several criteria proposes solutions to the project committee or the project manager.

Multimedia & HTML specialist: They are responsible for the preparation of learning content and the transformation of hard copy material to electronic learning modules. Their work has often bottlenecks since have to wait for content from authors or content providers.

Technology Provider: The technology provider has a product to sell and he tries to convince the project manager or the scientific coordinator that his solution is closer to project needs.

5. **STUDENTS:** This stakeholder group is either forced or willing to participate in an *e-learning* course. The main interest of students is the assimilation of knowledge and the acquisition of the degree or diploma the course presumably provides. Very often he is disappointed from the static content of html pages, which are the containers of learning content in *e-learning* implementations.

4.3 Stakeholder Relationships

Following the identification of stakeholder groups, we illustrate how they are interrelated within the *e-learning* network (Figure 1).

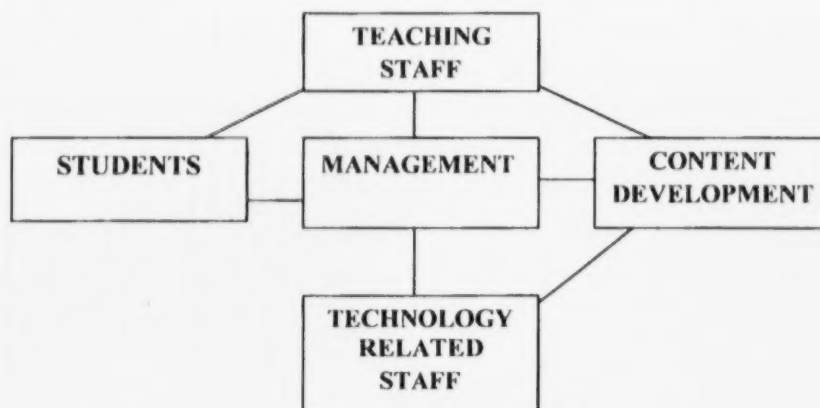


Figure 1: Stakeholder Relationships

5. Ethical Issues in e-Learning

In a recent study on the role of codes of conduct in ethical behavior in academic institutions (Rezaee *et al.*, 2001), the authors project the main issues that codes attempt to deal with. It should be noted that the issues discussed concern traditional academic institutions, and not e-learning environments. The most common issues are:

- Conflicts of interest
- Compliance with university policies
- Faculty grievances
- Administrators, faculty and staff performance
- Confidentiality of proprietary information
- Tenure and promotion policies and procedures
- Financial fraud
- Allegation of fraudulent conduct in research or scholarly procedures

Other ethical issues discussed in literature are integrity, equality, economic efficiency and equivalence (Tucker *et al.*, 1999), as well as security and privacy (Stead and Gilbert, 2001). All the presented issues need to be re-examined for e-learning environments. However, as discussed earlier on, academic fraud is the most problematic ethical issue in the academic agenda; for this reason we will elaborate on this issue further.

5.1 Academic Cheating

Dealing with the issue of cheating is not an easy task. It requires efforts regarding both academic and technological interventions. Due to the nature of the e-learning environment, these efforts need to take place from the design of the system and course rather than making adjustments, if they are to be mostly effective. Furthermore, these efforts regard various stakeholders, as we shall see further on.

Philips and Horton (2000) have suggested four 'strategies for monitoring and discouraging cheating':

- 1) Continuously update topics for projects and avoid 'classics'
- 2) Promote group effort
- 3) Police the internet for potential violations
- 4) Develop a well thought-out set of policies and regulations regarding cheating

Indeed, these four strategies should be able to promote a more ethical pattern for e-learning practices. However, the role of technology within these considerations is very critical. In order for the preceded propositions to be mostly utilized, they should be considered primarily in the design of the system, while keeping in mind the stakeholders and their interests as proposed in the findings of the stakeholder analysis. Following we apply the suggestions of the two authors to the stakeholder groups we have identified.

Continuously update topics for projects and avoid 'classics'

By achieving this, it should make it more difficult for students to find reusable assignments, either from previous academic terms, or from the internet.

This task regards primarily the TEACHING STAFF stakeholder group. They will be required to always be current, and continuously look for new topics while searching for similar topics available on the web. However, this task does not only depend on TEACHING STAFF, but CONTENT DEVELOPMENT as well. Teaching material should also be updated and new events or e.g. case studies should be incorporated.

Promote group effort

Group effort can minimize cheating to a great extent. Apart from creating a 'moral obligation' towards other group members, it also reduces the possibility of actually having a whole project done by someone else, unless the whole group decides to do so. It would also be sensible to change groups often, based upon random choice of members.

Having such a strategy is a matter of MANAGEMENT, as well as the stakeholders involved in the previous proposition. However, this task requires certain technological applications that promote online collaboration, which would therefore require the involvement of TECHNOLOGY RELATED STAFF.

Police the internet for potential violations

Although it might not seem as the most preferable strategy, it is necessary to do so. Submitted assignments should be checked on the web.

Develop a well thought-out set of policies and regulations regarding cheating

Before all, it is necessary to consider all possibilities that can potentially arise, develop a set of regulations and procedures and make everyone aware.

This is an issue of the MANAGEMENT to develop the set of policies and regulations. However, CONTENT DEVELOPMENT STAFF, TEACHING STAFF, TECHNOLOGY RELATED STAFF and even STUDENTS should not be kept in isolation during such a task.

Apart from the four strategies discussed by Philips and Horton, there are a few other suggestions:

- Ethics should be included in the curriculum of every course. Students should be taught ethics, not only for the sake of academic ethical behavior, but professional ethics as well. Ethical awareness is perhaps more important than a new code of ethics (Doost, 1997).
- Surveillance techniques should be established for e-learning. Technological advancements should be incorporated in e-learning applications that could, to a certain extent, monitor students.
- Research should be conducted in the matter of what causes unethical practices. Crown and Spiller (1998) suggest individual and situational factors that lead to cheating, such as age, gender, religion and previous education. Such work should also be done for e-learning, which would help in best understanding how to avoid and/or deal with unethical behavior.

6. Conclusion

"The G.E.M. degree will displace classical marketing, accounting and law studies with e-commerce versions. There is a strong belief that this is essentially what a regular MBA will look like in five or six years" (Brin, 1999 in Stead and Gilbert, 2001). Indeed, in terms of quality of course content, delivery, and overall practice, G.E.M. and other e-learning cases may well be of high standards. However, in order for e-learning to establish a stronghold alongside traditional university education, social factors need to be considered equivalently.

It has been noted that ethical issues are not given the necessary attention in e-learning implementations, as they do in traditional formal educational practices. Although these issues arise from the application of new technologies in the educational context, the subject is not purely technological, but merely a matter of the design and delivery of the service, whilst considering the changes in the delivery and assimilation of education that e-learning technologies bring about.

In our paper, we have conducted a stakeholder analysis and identified the following stakeholder groups in an e-learning environment: Management, Teaching Staff, Content Development, Technology Related Staff and Students. After a presentation of their generalized roles within an e-learning environment and their relationships, we have proceeded to the presentation of various ethical issues addressed in academic environments, and, with a focus on the issue of academic cheating, reflected various proposed strategies on the identified stakeholder groups. By doing so, we have generated a clearer picture of how one issue concerns all the stakeholder groups in an e-learning environment. Also, we can see how stakeholder interests are interrelated and therefore where potential conflicts of interest reside.

We believe that if e-learning opts to grow of equivalent respect to traditional education settings such as universities, ethics and morality are of the primary issues to be considered. In this paper, we have initiated a discussion regarding the issue of ethics in e-learning environments, with a focus on academic cheating. However, a more in-depth analysis is required in order to generate considerable input for the design of such an information system. Finally, as Colette (2001) suggests, in order for e-learning systems to be successful, they must be designed and constructed with care, using scientific procedures and techniques. In turn, this calls upon ethical responsibility and professionalism in the design and development of an e-learning system.

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